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SIPDIS

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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIA DEFENDS RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, BUT CAUTIOUSLY

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C/NF) During the mid-October visit of Warren Cofsky, from DRL's Office of International Religious Freedom, Embassy officials met with a series of government officials and religious leaders involved in religious freedom issues. Though those affiliated with the government stuck closely to GOT talking points, the Catholic Bishop did raise some concerns about how GOT reluctance to change the status quo could negatively affect the Church in the future. End Summary.

All Together Now

¶2. (C) From October 14 to October 17, Warren Cofsky, from DRL's Office of International Religious Freedom, met with a variety of government officials and civil society representatives. Though the meetings were different, the message was the same: Tunisia respects all religions and President Ben Ali supports dialogue and cooperation. For example, parliamentarian and leader of the Jewish community in Tunis Roger Bismuth opined that President Ben Ali was dedicated to religious dialogue, evidenced by the number of conferences Tunisia hosts on this subject. He added that mutual understanding is the best inoculation against extremism, thus religious dialogue could also be seen as a tool against terrorism. Concluding, Bismuth mentioned that he hoped to convince the Minister of Education and the Minister of Higher Education to add chapters on Jewish history to the standard Tunisian curriculum, but acknowledged that this is still a work in progress. (Note: Bismuth did not mention that despite his close ties to the government and the GOT's support of the Jewish community, the Association of the Jewish Community in Tunisia has been waiting for years for legal recognition.)

¶3. (C) Cofsky and EmbOffs also met with the President of Zeitouna University, a government university that specializes in teaching religious subjects, and the Ben Ali Chair for Dialogue Between Civilizations Professor Mohamed Hassine Fantar. Like Bismuth, praise of Ben Ali's support for religious dialogue was a main topic of conversation. The President of the University noted that student of 53 different nationalities study there, primarily in the field of religious studies. He did admit, however, that students must be nominated by their home country and then be approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education before being allowed to enroll. Professor Fantar also stressed the importance of conferences and called Tunisia the most open country in the Arab world. Likewise, the President of the Jewish Community in Djerba praised

everything the GOT has done to support the Jewish community (such as providing security for synagogues and allowing Jewish students to spend half-days in religious schools), and said that the community supported President Ben Ali.

Catholic Bishop Has Concerns

¶4. (C/NF) Catholic Bishop Maroun Lahham shared several concerns with Cofsky during their meeting. He began by explaining that legally, the Catholic Church is the only recognized church in Tunisia. The Greek and Russian Orthodox churches are considered religious consulates of sorts, existing under the umbrella of their home country's diplomatic mission to Tunisia. Two other churches have large congregations, namely the Anglican and Lutheran churches, but according to Bishop Lahham, they have difficulty employing people because of their lack of legal status. This has become an issue, as the Anglican Church recently designated a bishop for Tunisia who will be consecrated in late November. Rather than operate under the auspices of the British Embassy in Tunisia, the church would like to be independent and has approached the GOT for official recognition, but this has yet to be granted. Some 14 additional churches were given land grants at the time of Tunisia's independence, but the Bishop opined that many of these may no longer be active.

¶5. (C/NF) Though he called Christians "statistically negligible" in Tunisia, Bishop Lahham speculated that the GOT is nevertheless reluctant to modify the Catholic Church's status agreement with the GOT, for fear that might encourage Islamic groups to seek the same rights. The Catholic Church is only allowed to sell property; it can not purchase new buildings or land, although it is allowed to build on land it already owns. Lahham said this is problematic as, under the agreement between the Catholic Church and the GOT, several Orders within the Church were given the deeds to specific properties and tracts of land. Some of the Orders originally present in Tunisia have since left, but the Church isn't allowed to have the title changed. It would like to keep the buildings, but cannot legally transfer them to the Bishop's control. While the Church continues to maintain the properties, doing so is technically illegal, he explained. Bishop Lahham said he worried about what would happen if a zealous government official took a close look at the contracts. He said he had sent a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on this subject, but had not received a response in over six months. The Catholic Church has plans to build a pedagogical center on one of its remaining large empty tracts of land because, "empty land might tempt others," referring to previously public land (NFI) that was supposed to be protected, but was somehow transferred to the President's in-laws.

¶6. (C/NF) Bishop Lahham explained that while the Tunisian constitution allows conversion, socially and culturally the issue is much more complex. Families are generally against conversion to Christianity, and the government is also sensitive to anything it perceives as proselytizing. The Bishop said that he took great pains to never be seen as urging conversion. When he is approached by prospective converts, he questions them rigorously to determine their sincerity. If their bona fides are established, they would begin a four-five year process of learning about Catholicism before they could be baptized. He pegged the total number of conversions at around 30-35 over the last 20 years.

Comment

¶7. (C/NF) The measures concerning religious tolerance put in place under President Bourghiba have been in large part maintained by President Ben Ali. The GOT has not proved willing, however, to take new steps, such as recognizing new religious organizations, new churches, or altering the agreements allowing acknowledged religious groups to operate

in Tunisia. While Tunisia does deserve credit for promoting and participating in interfaith dialogues, this kind of activity has taken place mainly among elites. With respect to the Catholic Church's status, it would also be helpful if the GOT would recognize that the status quo can be changed without jeopardizing security and stability. End Comment.

18. (U) This message was not cleared by Warren Cofsky before he departed post.
GODEC